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IN SEARCH OF THE DARK CRYSTAL

by Don Chase

The latest film from Muppet master Jim Henson and his associates has not a trace of Miss Piggy and Kermit. *The Dark Crystal* has instead a live-action puppet cast of Landstriders, Skeksis, UrRu, Garthim, and Gelfling. Henson, who codirected, illustrator Brian Froud, special visual effects creator Brian Smithies, and director of photography Oswald Morris go step-by-step through the planning and production of the megabuck motion picture. Chase is a freelance writer specializing in film and theatre.





In search of The Dark Crystal

by Don Chase

"It all started about five years ago," Jim Henson says of *The Dark Crystal*. Henson, creator of The Muppets, is coproducer and codirector of and puppeteer/performer in the \$20 million-plus (non-Muppet) fantasy film released by Universal for Christmas 1982.

"There was the germ of an idea, which I began embellishing through conversations with my two daughters and several people connected with my company"—Henson Associates, the empire Miss Piggy and friends built. "Then one of my people showed me a book of [illustrator/fantasy artist] Brian Froud's illustrations, and I felt my idea and his style could go together."

"We started off with a broad idea of what this totally imaginary universe might contain," says Froud, who has "conceptual designer" credit on the film. Henson wanted to use a basic mythic structure—a young man comes of age as a result of passing various trials in the course of a quest. And he had been thinking in terms of reptilian bad guys and motifs and ceremonies from various early Anglo-Saxon religions—fish creatures and Celtic themes recur in Froud's work.

"But," Froud continues, "reversing the

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The Dark Crystal, a \$20 million dollar Universal release produced by Jim Henson and Gary Kurtz, has a cast of live-action puppets, enacting good guys—UrRu (top right) and Gelfling (with an UrRu, bottom right)—and bad guys—Skeksis and Garthim—who vie for an empowering crystal—actually a piece of faceted fibreglass. The puppets' design was guided by the need to keep physical movement as simple as possible to engineer. An eight-legged prototype for the Landstriders, for example, was rejected in favor of a four-legged creature (bottom left) that could be "inhabited" by a bent-over performer on stilts. The movements of the Skeksis's claw-like hands (top left) were modeled on those of a four-fingered human hand. Photos © ITC Entertainment Ltd.

using it in situations ranging from film and television to standard long-play proscenium houses. If you would like more information, please write to Donna Arnink, Room 149 Auditorium, Theatre Department, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824.

DARK CRYSTAL

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usual order of things, the final script wasn't written [by David Odell] until we'd determined the personalities of the characters and what they would do."

Because the film's "characters" consist entirely of live-action puppets, what they would do was ultimately a function of what they could do—on camera, without benefit of postproduction trick shots. So from very early on codirector and performer Frank Oz, a longtime colleague of Henson's, and a dozen key puppet designers and builders worked with Henson and Froud; the number doubled as principal photography drew nearer.

Froud's line drawings would first be translated into 5" or 6" models of Das (a papier-mâché-like material), in the approximate colors envisaged, and then

undergo whatever refinements Henson and Froud found desirable. "All rather easy," Froud recalls. Then the results would "not so easily" be translated into a prototype (often polyfoam over a fiberglass shell) of a filmable puppet.

"We'd spend a few weeks putting together a rough mockup of the character, get somebody inside it, operate it, videotape it, then rip it apart and start again," Henson says. They kept the scale of the first prototypes for the final puppets—Jen and Kira, the "Gelfling," were a little over 3' tall, the evil "Skeksis" monsters about two-and-a-half times larger to provide sufficient menace—but that was about all.

"In general we found that the first prototypes for our characters were far too complicated from the physical movement standpoint," Henson admits. "We were losing the focus on the faces. The faces were too dark in color and the eyes were not delineated enough." This became particularly apparent when director of photography Oswald Morris began doing film tests on the creatures, about 18 months in advance of shooting, but was mitigated by what Morris calls "Jim's unrelenting perfectionism in trying to make the faces ever more expressive." Probably equally important was the

Henson group's growing familiarity with foam latex. "Previously," says Dick Smith, the wizard responsible for special makeup effects in *The Exorcist* and *Altered States*, "they hand-scissored their puppets out of solid blocks of polyfoam. I came in for a few weeks to train them in the use of foam latex." (Stewart Freeborn, the man responsible for animating the creatures in the *Star Wars* cantina sequence, also advised the *Dark Crystal* people.)

The Landstriders—the vaguely ostrich-like beasts Jen and Kira use for transport—provide an example of refining and simplifying a concept to make it work on film. In his earliest notes on the creatures, Henson says that they had to "run like the wind." "My job," Froud says, "was to visualize something that could do that. To spark ideas we brought in some mime and ballet artists and got them to try to create these creatures with their bodies, bending into shapes and formations together. And we came up with some very exciting ones, largely because you could see they were human bodies interacting with each other. But once they were encased in suits, they became fairly mundane. The magic went.

"Next we thought we might do something that jumped up into a glide," Froud

goes on, "and we came up with a large, insect-like creature with eight legs. It worked in some ways but not in others. So we stopped and reconsidered and brought back the mimes—a different group, one of whom was a stilt walker.

"We asked him to walk around for us to see if there were any possibilities there. I ended up designing around that—eventually the Landstriders became very tall four-legged creatures." Each Landstrider suit encased a bent-over human with stilts attached to both hands and legs. Even in that seemingly awkward position, they did manage eventually to get up considerable speed.

The running was perfected during months of preproduction rehearsal and facilitated by the "mechanical" or "floor" special effects crew headed by Brian Smithies. Huge mirrors were put up during the rehearsal period so that the performers inside the Landstrider suits (and the performers inside the full-size versions of other creatures built in multiple perspectives) could watch themselves as they worked. Oswald Morris reports that "the temperature of the rehearsal stage was raised very high to get the performers used to the heat of the big lights we'd use when we actually started filming. We worked at very high light levels, often going to T8 and once nearly to T11, because we wanted great depth of focus. We chose to shoot in the anamorphic Panavision format (1:2.35) for much the same reason—to present the background as powerfully as possible. Rather than the arcs we might have wanted, we used incandescent lamps to accommodate the performers. You would have had to trim the much hotter arcs—and risk having the performers pass out in their suits."

Brian Smithies' unit assisted in springing the metal stilt suspension mechanism within the Landstriders' latex legs. The idea was not only to increase the Landstriders' speed but also to simulate muscle movement beneath the "skin." Floor effects devised a special (imperceptible) overhead safety harness to carry the Landstriders along as well as to prevent falls.

Henson, Froud, Morris, and Smithies all agree that as *The Dark Crystal* neared shooting, aesthetic changes were few—usually in the nature of refinements. The film breaks down into half a dozen spheres of color and atmosphere, each associated with a category of creature or a physical locale. Froud set the basic concepts for the various creatures/locales, and with Morris embellished them. The unfriendly Garthim characters, for example, were originally conceived

as being a stark jet black (in contrast to the warmer, softer colors of the UrRu, who are friendly to Jen and Kira). Morris eventually shaded the black with silver to bring out the detail in the costume. The detailing added by Froud often had a psychosymbolic aspect: to suggest the weighty, grasping menace of tyrannical royalty, he bedizened the Skeksis with clunky rock jewelry and made their hands little more than tentacle-like claws. The manipulative skills of Dick Smith, who lost a finger in a film set mishap over a decade ago, were studied by the engineers of the Skeksis's cable controlled four digit hands. In fact, most of the alterations in the visual conception of *The Dark Crystal* were dictated by me-

chanical considerations. The idea of having colored flames in the UrRu's cave was modified because, Brian Smithies reports, "the colored flames just didn't photograph well. We went back to yellow. We'd also been thinking of a sheet of falling flame, but that was modified for safety reasons." Often, however, Smithies' work as director of the miniature-model unit did not involve the puppets, so he enjoyed a relative flexibility. When the carbon-dioxide vapor he was using as smoke in the shaft leading to the crystal chamber plummeted down instead of curling up, he simply flipped the film.

Henson is reluctant to reveal exactly how all the creatures were animated or how many versions in which sizes there

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were of each. He suggests, though, that most of the puppets existed in more than one perspective. Depending on their perspective and what they were supposed to do in a given shot, they might involve either human inhabitants or direct or remote-controlled cables or pneumatics, or a combination. But the shot itself was ultimately determined by what the puppets could be made to do in relation to the camera.

"This was the most heavily storyboarded movie I've ever done," Morris says. "But it was necessary because the discrepancies in scale between one creature and another often made it difficult to compose. By storyboarding you could find ways to shoot the creatures individually, against parts of the sets, such as in the scene where a Garthim goes crashing through a wall." Because the puppet Garthim were not as strong as live creatures that size would be, Smithies' crew aided in the wall's collapse with a network of concealed wires and pneumatic rams.

Morris is quick to dispel the idea that the number of storyboarded single shots in *The Dark Crystal* might result in a very "cutty" movie. "We went through the whole range of Panavision prime lenses,"

he says, "from the widest angle to the longest focus, but we also zoomed quite a lot. The zoom was used in a very subtle way, so subtly that I hope it won't be noticed. It was used to avoid cutting. To manipulate these characters we had to take sections of the floors out, and since you couldn't lay camera tracks over the holes it was either cut or find a substitute for tracking—which we did with the zoom."

The floors that Morris mentions were platforms 4" above the studio floor. Henson says that puppeteers standing on the studio floor would "operate the creatures through the platform openings, which would change as panels were taken out and put back in to allow for movement across a given area. Sometimes, huge sections of the floor would break away and the camera would be mounted on a crane on the studio floor, which would put it roughly at the creatures' eye level.

"The platforming of sets was one of the great lessons of *The Great Muppet Caper*," Henson says. "We shot that film after we'd begun preparing *The Dark Crystal* and purposely used many of our key people"—Morris, Smithies, production designer Harry Lange among

them—"so that we'd have a really tight unit by the time we began shooting *Dark Crystal*. With a production as complicated as this one, communication and control became very important."

Communication was assured through weekly meetings of all departments, Smithies reports, so that everyone always knew what everyone else was doing. Control—actually more a knowledgeable, sympathetic collaboration—over Smithies' model unit was exercised by coproducer Gary Kurtz, previously coproducer of the model-heavy *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, and brought in by Henson specifically for his experience.

Oswald Morris exercised control by shooting on Eastman 5247 stock (instead of experimenting with, say, a Fuji film), because he knew its capabilities. Shooting the entire film at EMI Studios, in London, and using familiar Technicolor labs there were other pluses for Morris. "Obviously, you can control the light more easily in a studio than on location," he says, "and in England we communicate closely with the labs and have color-timed rushes, instead of the one-light prints you get in California. The color you see in dailies is pretty close to the finished film."

For Jim Henson, codirector and fellow performer Frank Oz was a constant source of feedback. "We'd talked things out so much that by our shooting date we were very much in agreement," Henson says. "Yet we each have our strengths. Frank's are in the area of character development, and mine are slightly more visual—choreographing a camera movement, framing a shot. There aren't that many scenes where we're on camera together. When one of us was performing in a scene the other would be stronger in the directorial role. But the one who was performing could finish a take and look at it on the video playback monitor and then add his 'directorial' contribution."

Brian Froud found that working on *The Dark Crystal* entailed learning new modes of communication and control. In his work for the printed page, he was "used to being in total control" of his own world. "Here, though, I had to learn to communicate with others and to accommodate or translate their ideas. To begin with I couldn't communicate verbally—I answered questions with my fingers, by sculpting something for Jim and the others. But then I got better with words and used them as I was approving colors and finishes during filming, to ensure control—that is, to make sure that the ideas that we'd all decided on were carried out."

Now that *The Dark Crystal* has evolved from Jim Henson's conversations with his daughters to a megabuck reality, two questions arise: is the film just for children, and can a film popular mainly in the kiddie market make the \$30 to \$35 million *The Dark Crystal* needs to recoup its production, interest, advertising, and distribution costs?

"The world of *The Dark Crystal* is layered," Henson answers. "There are different levels of meaning. While the film is easily understood by children, there should be more than enough there to stimulate an adult."

"Good and Evil," Brian Froud elaborates, "are seen very distinctly at first. But then they overlap in ways that we hope are fairly subtle. The image of the monster, Skeksis, which in another film might be saved for a shock at the end, is seen throughout *The Dark Crystal*—you get somewhat used to it, as you do to an ever-present evil in real life. And good, the film suggests, is sometimes ineffectual—you can see that in the way Jen and Kira move physically. I created the world of *The Dark Crystal* not for a spe-

cific audience but for myself. Which, I think, means that anyone can enjoy it."

The Dark Crystal. Produced by Jim Henson and Gary Kurtz. Directed by Jim Henson and Frank Oz. Executive Producer: David Lazer. Screenplay by David Odell. Story by Jim Henson. Special dialogue by Alan Garner. Conceptual designer: Brian Froud. Production designer: Harry Lange. Director of photography: Oswald Morris, BSC. Film editor: Ralph Kemplen. Music by Trevor Jones. Special visual effects by Brian Smithies and Roy Field. Filmed at EMI Elstree Studios, Borehamwood, Hertfordshire, England, and on locations in England. A Henson organization Ltd. production for ITC Films International. Distributed by Universal Pictures and Associated Film Distribution Corporation.